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**Arendt and Theology**, John Kiess, Bloomsbury, 2016 (ISBN 978-0-56722-227-5), xii + 248 pp., Hb £55 / Pb £17.99.

The German Jewish political philosopher Hannah Arendt provided my bridge into theology. By the end of an undergraduate course on her thought, I had seen how theological commitments and engagements may underpin secular political and social theories, and so for my next degree switched to theology. Because Arendt played this key role in my own intellectual formation I especially welcome John Kiess's excellent systematic study of her relation to theology, as well as commending it to others who would like to learn more.

Kiess perspicaciously observes that 'Arendt's self-understanding is not always the most reliable guide to her thought' (72). In particular, her periodic laments for an intellectual heritage that she deems incapable of addressing the modern human condition, especially totalitarianism, sit uneasily alongside her own frequent turns to theologians, especially Augustine, in her analyses. Arendt, Kiess convincingly argues, assumed tradition to be static rather than iterative, and so was unable to recognize that her own 'pearl diving' in the waters of the past formed part of an ongoing trajectory of enquiry. This study successfully distinguishes Arendt's project from her own presentations of it, and in so doing advances beyond both.

In the public mind, Arendt was best known for reporting for *The New Yorker* on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi bureaucrat who helped mastermind the Holocaust. Eichmann had been captured by Mossad agents in Buenos Aires in 1960 and extraordinarily rendered to Israel, where he was then put on trial, found guilty and executed two years later. Commentators have made much of Arendt's supposed shift from viewing totalitarian evil as radical to interpreting it as banal. Along with several others, Kiess rightly suggests that her concept of evil did not, in reality, undergo significant change: from the fact that evil is ontologically a privation it does not follow that, at the phenomenological level, it might not wreak terrible effects. Rather, as Arendt sat in the Jerusalem courtroom, what changed was her interest in how evil arises and spreads through a mind and a society. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she had expressed contempt for the Nuremburg trials because, she argued, they sought to apply the normal legal concepts of motive and proportionate punishment to an entirely new kind of crime to which they were unsuited. However, Arendt became utterly absorbed in the judicial process against Eichmann, because it enabled her to take an imaginative step inside the mental life of a perpetrator of great evil. It also helped her to see how the judgment of evil acts by spectators is a collective human task that is necessary if a shared world is to endure.

This brings us to Arendt's love for that world, which she regarded as a common human possession with the power to gather citizens together. In his third chapter, Kiess fairly depicts her forsaking an Augustinian *caritas* that directs human attention heavenward to God in favour of a 'civic virtue that seeks the common good without . . . a love of glory' (98), urging that civic virtue is needed to preserve the world because the world is fragile. Although Arendt calls into question Augustine's privileging of ecclesial belonging above living in the world, she recognizes that he thereby preserved a classical conception of citizenship for the present day. Set against this, consumer society appears intrinsically private. Indeed, Arendt's own recognition of the need to live in the world but not to be ruled by the desire for mutable goods parallels Augustine's own view of objects in the world as appropriately 'used' rather than as substituted for goods, which alone are ultimate, and enjoyed in their place.

The topic of the fourth chapter is Arendt's concept of natality, which she developed in opposition to the privileging of mortality that extends from Paul to Heidegger. She viewed new life as a new beginning analogous to the original creative act. Finding support in book 12 of *The City of God*, Kiess refutes some of Arendt's critics, who have charged her with thereby promoting a radical Pelagian voluntarism according to which anything is possible. Rather, for Arendt—as for Rahel Varnhagen, the Romantic intellectual whose biography she penned—acknowledging natality entailed embracing the giftedness, and hence givenness, of birth and life as a Jew. Only after accepting the unchangeable aspects of their identity, she suggests, is a person able to act freely. A similar point may be made about action, which, although boundless and irreversible in its effects, is possible only in concert with others. Kiess argues that, by grounding political action in Augustine's theology of creation, Arendt points to a politics of grace that goes beyond Augustine himself.

Finally, attention turns to thinking, which Arendt deems to be central to politics. Thought, in her sense, is very different from cognition, which she regards in Kantian terms as an instrumental activity associated with knowledge acquisition, rather than as an open Socratic dialogue of self and other. Like the late Roman philosophers and their modern heir, G. W. F. Hegel, Arendt was sensitized to the loss and rupture inherent in thinking, believing that it is out of these that true reflection emerges. For this reason, my friendship with others requires me to befriend myself: the overcoming of estrangement is achieved at least as much within subjects as between subjects. However, in contrast with Hegel, although reconciliation is possible, in a fragile and ambiguous world all totalizing syntheses are invalid.

This closing chapter also outlines some striking parallels with the *ressourcement* project initiated by the French Jesuits and Dominicans, who, like Arendt, also reoriented theory to worldly reality and interpreted the pathologies they identified through much earlier sources and traditions.

More might be said about this. Also like Arendt, the Jesuits' philosophical midwife Maurice Blondel argued that reflection was grounded in action. This was no mere habitual activity but a new step into the world that refuted the neo-scholastic attribution of creative action solely to God. This high valuation of human action as cooperating with divine action was developed by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and inspired liberation theologians at least as much as Marxism.

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